

HANDLE WITH HONESTY

Christmas in Herod's Hands

Text: Matthew 2:1-8

Introduction to the Scripture

There's no story like the Christmas story to help us see the divine opportunities present in everyday life. The bottom line is that how we handle circumstances like those presented at the first Christmas helps determine how we'll handle all the situations and seasons in this year ahead. That's why I want to return again today and then once more next week to examine some final pieces of this magnificent narrative. We pick up the tale in Matthew chapter 2 at verse 1 this morning. Listen as I read from the Word of God. *[Scripture Reading]*

The Greatness of Herod

Of all the figures we meet in the Christmas story, few are quite so fascinating as this man whom history has dubbed, "Herod the Great." The word "great," as you know, can be an ambiguous term. When you speak of going on a "great date" or attending a "great banquet," the word carries wonderful connotations, doesn't it? When you're living through a "great depression" or a "great war," however, the meaning of the word is not so happy. In Herod's case, the term "great" carried BOTH senses.

On one level, Herod was a phenomenal figure. In an era where kingships came and went as fast as celebrity does today, Herod had a simply staggering run. By the time Jesus was born, Herod had been sitting on the throne of Judea for 40 years. A master politician in an almost impossible district, Herod managed to keep the feisty Jewish people largely placated. To do this, he launched massive public works projects which created jobs and improved local infrastructure. To the delight of the Jewish religious leaders, he invested heavily in improving the Temple and prevented Roman idols from invading its precincts. In times of famine and economic duress, Herod mounted feeding programs that kept the populace from starving.

At the same time, Herod was able to keep Rome content at a time when Caesar was in the habit of changing out governors like retailers do holiday displays. He had a shrewd knack for naming his building projects after Caesar or his relatives. He kept a steady stream of revenue flowing back to the Roman beltway. He allowed enough freedom of expression that the Jews could let off some steam, but kept his thumb firmly enough on local rabble-rousers that the tide of revolt never really threatened Rome or brought down the repression experienced by other provinces. Herod helped Judea cope with Roman occupation. He helped provide some measure of security and order in the lives of the Israelites. Herod helped maintain a certain level of prosperity – especially for his devotees – for a very long time.

But there was also a dark side to Herod. He was a progressively greedy man. He had a palace-building palate like Saddam Hussein. He loved wine, women, and song to rampant excess. And to support his lavish lifestyle, he crushed his people with taxes and demanded more and more of them. Along with these appetites, Herod was absolutely paranoid about losing his power. Over the course of his reign, Herod murdered his own mother, his wife Alexandria, and three of his four sons – all on mere suspicion that they *might* try to rob him of his power or be considering giving their allegiance to others. Herod brooked no rivals. He had to have absolute devotion – or at least the appearance thereof. In fact, he had a standing executive order that at the time of his death, all of the leading citizens of Jerusalem should be arrested and executed so that the city would be in mourning on the day that he died.

You can see better now, can't you, the deeper currents running beneath what we read in Matthew's account of the Christmas story? When wise men came from the East, inquiring **"Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?"** what would you expect Herod's response to be? It was characteristically ambiguous. On the one hand, Herod appeared devoted to advancing whatever benefitted Jewish religious aspirations: **"Go and make a careful search for the child,"** he told the Magi. **"As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."** But on the other hand, Herod wants to know **"the exact time the star had appeared"** and **"where the Christ was to be born."** Why? He wants to fix the birthday and location of this child for one real reason: so that he can more efficiently focus the genocide he will soon unleash against every boy child born around that date.

This was the bizarre confluence of "greatness" as Herod embodied it. He was an immensely creative magistrate and an incredibly cruel master. He was a seductively attractive developer and a strategically accurate destroyer. He wormed his way into your confidence by all he promised to give, but then destroyed your joy by all he finally took. Everyone hailed what Herod created, but sooner or later, everybody hated what Herod cost. Temporary help and terrible heartache came wherever Herod was King.

The Herod in Our Heart

I want to suggest to you this morning that this part of the Christmas story is also our story. In far too many lives, Herod is still alive and well and sitting on the throne. I value what Craig Barnes, the pastor of the Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, has to say on this subject. "In every life there is a Herod," writes Barnes, something or someone "that has gained some power over you. You are seduced into calling it 'great' because it does things for you. It helps you feel secure. It helps you cope. It's been around for a long time. Herod is the name of whatever it is that offers you something you crave at a cost you cannot afford. You love what it does; you hate what it costs. But as taxing as it is, you just keep paying."¹

The question for all of us is: What is the Herod in me? What have I given authority to

in the hope of all that it can do for me? For some of us, maybe it is career ambition. That's what has the throne. I'm going to get to the top. I'm going to have all the benefits that come from having great success. And, then, more and more, the King exacts his price. We don't see the kids. We don't know our spouse. We forget how to rest or to play. We make choices that act like a deli-slicer on our soul. Maybe life's pressures are so great that we give the throne to alcohol or some other drug. It helps us cope. It provides a feeling of security or well-being for awhile, until it begins to demand more and then take more and then kill off the spirit and relationships that are life itself.

For some of us, Herod is an old wound or loss that we have crowned with a great deal of power in our life. With absolute authority it now decrees why our life isn't what it should be, why it isn't getting better or can't get better. That old pain now owns us. I know people for whom anger is king. They are angry at their spouse, or at their parent, or at the people at work or in school. Someone did me wrong. I hate that person for what he or she did or did not do. Now I'm spending huge amounts of inner energy and personal time nodding and simmering around that throne. Your Herod may be the worldview of your political party or the voice of your favorite pundit or preacher. It might be your nationalism. It could even be your religion or your hatred of religion, your attitude toward the poor or the rich.

It is, frankly, hard to escape the kingdom of Herod. The Bible says that when Herod heard the news that there might be another king, **"he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him."** Well, of course! The courts of all these kinds of kings are paranoid places. You ever try to leave a career culture early because you're concerned about your family or balance? You ever try to leave the circle of drinking buddies or pain- or rage-aholics? You ever try to express disagreement in the court of some political, cultural, or religious worldview? You know what happens. People get disturbed. These courts are always watching for signs that you're not zealous enough for the cause, or holding to the party line. Herod doesn't tolerate disloyalty. You know what he does to rivals. So, what is your Herod?

He will be someone or something that, at first, seems to offer you plenty. He seems to give you security or validation. He helps order your schedule or your viewpoint, your allegiance or your emotions. Giving him authority seems an appropriate strategy to finding peace or a sense of place. At the very least, Herod tells you who to hate or with whom to hang out. But giving him the throne is ultimately very costly, because Herod does not care about you. He does not care that by bowing to him you will lose far more than you gain. Herod simply wants power – even though giving it to him costs you that very health of heart, that breadth of mind, that depth of soul, or strength of body that are the gifts you were born to have.

The Greatness of Jesus

But this is the Good News for every one of us have been living too long in the Kingdom of Herod: The true King, the only King worthy of enthroning, is in the land. Though his hands once wielded the scepter that summoned the Universe into being, this King chose to come to us as a child with open hands, reaching out to take ours. Though He is the authority before whom every knee will one day bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord, this King came to us not with demands, but offering a free invitation to enter a Kingdom where power is defined not as control but as Love.

Don't you want to live in His kingdom? Wouldn't you rather have a King known for his curing than the one known for his killing? The main thing required is HONESTY. First, I have to be willing to be honest about naming the Herod in my heart – even if the truth is that I want to be Herod myself. The truth is that there are times when I don't want accountability or authority to belong to anyone but me. I like the throne and I get *disturbed* when God or anyone else tries to push me off it. But, secondly, I also need to be honest about the costs of serving under Herod's management. I mean does my life or your life or the life of this world evidence great leadership in those places where the love and wisdom of Christ isn't directing it?

Then, finally, I have to be honest about inviting Jesus to take his rightful place. It is very easy for us to be like Herod in this story. I mean, he talked a great game about being very interested in the birth of the Christ, about finding Jesus and worshipping Him. If there had been one, Herod would probably have gone to a Christmas Eve service and appeared very devout. Herod had even wise men fooled. But, as we'll explore further next week, there's a very important difference between handling Christmas – going through the motions – and handing Jesus the throne -- not the back seat or the side seat but the throne.

I know that's not easy. Sometimes it's just a shimmy, shimmy, one cheek at a time change. But if we will honestly seek to make that change, this you can count on. The misplaced ambition and confused priorities that may be ruling us now will be set right in time. The stubborn addictions will lose their grip. The age-old wounds will be healed. The simmering anger or guilt that's been ruling us for too long will get washed over by His grace. The selfish, parochial worldviews we confuse with wisdom will get replaced by his charity and truth. Take the Christ Child's hands. Consciously set his manger on the throne of your heart every morning, and each week when you come here, and this you can count on. The infinite infant will grow to maturity there. Christ will grow in you, till there's no longer any room for Herod and the voices of his court within you.

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government will be upon his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Receive this gift and you will find that **“of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end”** (Isa 9:6-7). For this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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Handling Christmas (Part 6)

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

1. Who or what is your Herod – that voice or influence with unusual control over you?
 - An misplaced ambition?
 - A confused set of priorities?
 - An addiction?
 - A long-standing wound or hurt?
 - An anger toward someone?
 - A political worldview?
 - A cultural or economic orientation?
 - A religious or secular mindset?
 - Something else?
 - I don't know
2. How well is that Herod managing the kingdom under his control? What are the benefits or costs to his control?
3. Have you honestly invited Christ to take the throne? What would be some signs that Jesus is actually...
 - In the back seat of your life?
 - In the side seat?
 - On the throne?
4. Where do you especially pray that Christ's management will make a greater difference in your life? Why is this particularly important to you?
5. Of the following qualities or roles of Jesus described in Isaiah 9:6-7, which would you like to see more of and why?
 - Wonderful Counselor
 - Mighty God
 - Everlasting Father
 - Prince of Peace

¹ M. Craig Barnes, "Herod the Great," *Preaching Today*.